

NATO supports Operation Noble Eagle

NATO sends radar surveillance planes to protect United States

By Gerry J. Gilmore and Rudi Williams
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON — NATO has sent five of its Airborne Warning and Control Systems aircraft from Germany to Oklahoma in a historic first.

The action will free America’s own AWACS radar aircraft for operations against terrorism elsewhere, according to Air Force Gen. Joseph W. Ralston, supreme allied commander, Europe. This marks the first time in NATO’s 52-year history that the alliance’s assets are being used to help protect the United States, NATO officials noted.

The AWACS planes, plus a support aircraft, will assist U.S. continental defense operations in the wake of the Sept. 11 terror attacks in New York City and Washington, said Air Force Capt. Ed Thomas, spokesman for the North American Aerospace Defense Command, Peterson Air Force Base, Colo.

The NATO aircraft began deploying Oct. 9 from Geilenkirchen, Germany, and the last of the five are expected to be in place at Tinker Air Force Base, Okla., by Oct. 11, Thomas said.

The aircraft, under NORAD command, will be flown by multinational crews from 12 NATO nations, he noted. NORAD is responsible for air defense and early air warning for North American airspace.

The aircraft feature high-tech airborne surveillance, command and control, and communications systems and a crew of up to 19, depending on the mission, he remarked. The NATO AWACS planes, he said, will be providing radar coverage and surveillance operations for NORAD combat air patrols.

“They’ll augment what our U.S. resources were doing ... and provide an enhanced situational awareness to NORAD,” he remarked, adding that the planes would “be here as long as we need them.”

After the terror attacks on America, NATO invoked Article 5 of its charter, which states that a foreign attack on one member is considered an attack on the other 18 members.

Thomas said the United States requested the assistance. NATO ambassadors, who expressed their full support for the United States and the United Kingdom’s global campaign against terrorism, approved the U.S. request.

Ralston said NATO naval assets taking part in an exercise off the coast of Spain have been reassigned to the Standing Naval Force Mediterranean, consisting of nine ships from eight NATO countries.

“They’ve set sail to provide an allied military presence in the eastern Mediterranean and to demonstrate our resolve,” the general said. “These two actions underline the unwavering commitment of the 19 NATO nations to fight terrorism,” Ralston said. “We stand ready to provide any additional support requested by the United States, on order of the North Atlantic Council.”



An engineer checks a scale model of an Air Force E-3 AWACS before a 1969 wind tunnel test in the center’s 16-foot transonic wind tunnel. Today, NATO is sending five of its AWACS to aid in Operation Noble Eagle, homeland defense, so that the U.S. Air Force can deploy its AWACS in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.



NATO Airborne Warning and Control Systems aircraft (foreground) flies on patrol with a trainer/cargo aircraft. OTAN are the initials of the alliance’s name in French. (NATO photo)